

FOREWORD

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Oral History Interview

with

FRANCIS T.P. PLIMPTON

October 21, 1969
New York, New York

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: I guess the logical place to begin in an interview like this is with the question, when did you first meet--I imagine it was then Senator Kennedy?

PLIMPTON: Well, I think I first met him in Boston--I don't remember just when; it must have been when he was a Senator--at some sort of a social gathering. I remember having a very pleasant talk with him about what it was like to be in the Senate. I didn't detect any presidential ambitions at that moment, but I'm sure he probably had them. I remember meeting him--also when he was Senator--at the time my daughter graduated from Smith College, and he was the commencement speaker. I saw a little bit of him then. He spoke extremely well, and gave me an inferiority complex, because I had to give the commencement address at Smith about two or three years later. I had this uneasy precedent to think about.

O'BRIEN: Did you have any other contacts before he was invited to speak at the Democratic National Convention [unclear]

PLIMPTON: I must have met him once or twice in New York, but as is perfectly obvious, I never had any detailed talk with him. He was in and about

O'BRIEN: Well, now this took place just prior to the Bay of Pigs invasion . . .

PLIMPTON: About a week before.

O'BRIEN: A week before. And this was the first that either of you had any inkling at all that anything was being mounted?

PLIMPTON: That's right.

O'BRIEN: When did you realize that there was a much deeper involvement on the part of agencies of the United States government?

PLIMPTON: Well, actually, not until right in the middle of the thing, so to speak, as far as I was concerned. In the U.N. operation, you see, you tend to go off a little bit in different directions. Just as an example, the committees: That first year I was in the Special Political Committee, whereas the Cuban thing was in the First Committee. Of course, when the Cuba thing broke, we were all on that, needless to say. But that had been handled in the First Committee and I was always in other Committees. Beside the Special Political Committee I was also involved in the Sixth Committee (the Legal Committee), and in the Fifth Committee (the Budget Committee), none of which Adlai paid much attention to. So we were never going into everything together all the time--our functions were usually separated, quite a bit.

But I certainly never will forget the pictures of the Cuban warplanes which Adlai showed on the U.N. screen and said, "Look, it shows that the Castro deserters flew these planes--they have Cuban markings on them." I didn't suspect anything wrong then, but about the next day things began to break and it became perfectly obvious that we were deep in it and that the photographs were faked.

O'BRIEN: Now did you finally find out? Was it through the news media rather than through any official communication?

PLIMPTON: Well, Bundy came rushing up from Washington and I'm sure told us. I was not in the middle of that one nearly as much as in certain other things, and I don't remember being in on any definite talk between Adlai and Bundy on those two days. What I was doing, I can't remember, but I wasn't in the eye of the hurricane; so to speak.

O'BRIEN: You must have caught some of the responses of other nations. Is there anything that stands out in your memory in those days after?

PLIMPTON: Well, of course, Adlai felt absolutely sunk at having misled the United Nations.

And I--I guess I've written this somewhere, or you must have read it somewhere, that it was such a traumatic experience for him that when it came around to the Cuban missile crisis, he was unwilling to show the photographs of the Soviet missiles at the U.N. It was practically by force of arms that I made him do it.

I had that easel and the photographs concealed in the room outside the Security Council, virtually in defiance of instructions from him and from the State Department, who wouldn't let us use them because they wanted to save them for [Pierre ~~S~~ Salinger who wanted them for some television show.] I had to call up to the White House in the middle of the wrangle in the Security Council and get hold of Rusk and said, "Look, we've got to show the U.N. those pictures." He said, "Wait a moment," and then came back and said okay. I'd already written out--or rather, the Navy had written out a text describing the pictures, and I'd sort of rewritten it the night before so as to make it a little more intelligible. We practically forced Adlai to go ahead and do it. His reluctance was entirely due to the Bay of Pigs misuse of the pictures of the supposed Cuban Air Force plane.

O'BRIEN: Did he consider resigning at that point?

PLIMPTON: I don't think so, no.

O'BRIEN: How about yourself and other members of the delegation? Any of you at that point consider . . .

PLIMPTON: No. No. I didn't, at least. You were caught up in a crisis; we didn't have time to think about it because we were busy trying to defend the U.S. position against criticism from the Soviets and others. I know that Adlai felt very bitterly about it, but I don't think he thought of resigning.

O'BRIEN: Did the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs and particularly the false assumptions that you were operating under as far as the nature of the origins of the Bay of Pigs, do you feel that this in any way weakened the position of the United States in the United Nations in those months after?

PLIMPTON: Oh, yes. But not disastrously--never underestimate the ability of people to forget. It was obviously a very strong thing to forget for quite a while, but other things get talked about, and it just goes into the past. That's one of the pleasant things about unpleasant episodes, people forget them.

O'BRIEN: Well, passing on to the next Cuban crisis in a sense, the missile crisis. Do you remember about when you first learned of the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba?

PLIMPTON: I certainly do. I was not in Washington during the fatal week during which the missiles were discovered. The first time I knew was on Sunday; that's about four or five days after the discovery. Everything was very tightly held. Adlai was in Washington on Wednesday or somewhere around there, and was there, I think, practically all the rest of week, while we were so blindly carrying on up here. I remember Clayton Fritchey came out and spent the weekend with me at our house in Long Island. On Sunday, Adlai called from Washington and said, "You've got to cancel all my engagements." And Fritchey and I said, "What's going on?" He said, "Just do what I say." We said, "Is it good news or bad news?" He said, "The latter." And that was all we got out of him. Then he came up to New York on Monday and, of course, told us all about it on Monday. From then on, it's history.

O'BRIEN: From that point on were you kept tightly briefed about what was going on?

PLIMPTON: Oh, yes, every minute from then on. I did not go to Washington--I wasn't in on any of the Executive Committee meetings in Washington; I was up in New York the whole time.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any insight into Governor Stevenson's role at this point?

PLIMPTON: Well, he never talked about it very much, because I was not in on the crucial discussions in the Executive Committee. I do know that he was prepared to. . . . I do know that he was insistent, and I think very rightly so, on getting the U.N. into the act. I also know that he certainly did talk about our missiles in Turkey and in Northern Italy, which as it turned out, the Defense Department had been perfectly willing to get rid of for quite a while.

O'BRIEN: Was he aware of that before he suggested it?

PLIMPTON: I think so, yes. I think so. I remember his saying to me something like, "All those Defense Department people don't think about anything except shooting planes at theirs."

There's one item of history I've always felt was misrepresented in connection with that episode--Schlesinger's book gives Bobby Kennedy the credit for our answering the Soviets' first cable and ignoring the second. You may remember that there was a Friday afternoon cable from [Nikita S.] Khrushchev which was written in very "Khrushchev," earthy style. I remember it had the very good analogy: "You, Mr. President, and I have both ends of a rope with a knot tied in the middle. The harder we pull, the tighter the knot is. If we both loosen up, maybe we can untie the knot," something like that. It was a very good sort of earthy analogy. I remember Averell Harriman said--I think he was in New York at the time--I remember him saying, "I'm sure that Khrushchev wrote that."

Well, in any event, when that cable came in, we, of course, got it at the same time the State Department did. The communications system is such that when something important comes from New Delhi or wherever, it hits Washington and us at the same time. And I remember shouting with glee when that came in. I said, "We've got them now!" The next morning, of course, came a long, formal cable, obviously drafted by someone in the foreign office, with all sorts of conditions and so on. I know that I said, "For Christ sakes, let's accept the first one and disregard the second." Schlesinger gives Bobby credit for that idea, but I'm sure that everybody had it; I certainly did. I remember yelling it on the telephone to somebody in Washington. I think Adlai felt the same way. This is a minor point, but I always felt that Schlesinger was giving too much credit to one person, Bobby, for an idea that certainly occurred to me, and I'm sure to Adlai and to a lot of other people.

O'BRIEN: Passing on to the [Charles L.] Bartlett-[Joseph W.] Alsop article, which was written in the Saturday Evening Post, did you ever get any insight into the origin of that article?

PLIMPTON: I was always suspicious that either Jack or Bobby had leaked it, but I have no proof at all; it was just a suspicion. I don't know who. . . .

O'BRIEN: Ambassador Stevenson was quite upset about that?

PLIMPTON: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Did he consider resigning at that point?

PLIMPTON: Well, I can't truthfully answer. I think I would say he was hurt more than anything else. I'm sure he must have thought of resigning, but he isn't the resigning kind.. There wasn't in him the sort of resentfulness that makes one say, "the hell with it," and resign. That wasn't in his character.

O'BRIEN: Backing up a bit, of course one of the major questions I suppose you faced when you assumed your position in the United Nations was the question of Red China. What were your expectations in those early months of 1961? Did you expect at that point a change in policy and . . .

O'BRIEN: Yes. Yes, I didn't realize the connection.

PLIMPTON: Well, Omar Burleson, I remember very well. He was a very quiet and extremely conservative Democratic Congressman who was a member of the U.S. delegation to the General Assembly. Each fall there are always two people from Congress named as U.S. delegates to the General Assembly. One year they'll be from the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate, the next year they'll be from the Foreign Affairs Committee from the House. That year, 1961, it was the Foreign Affairs Committee from the House: Burleson and Mrs. [Marguerite S.] Church. Arthur Dean was in the delegation on account of disarmament. Yost, of course, was in the permanent Mission. Wharton, [Philip M.] Klutznick, [Jonathan B.] Bingham, Mrs. [Gladys A.] Tillet. She was a pleasant lady from the Carolinas.

O'BRIEN: You just reminded me of one specific question. It's been suggested that [John J.] McCloy was sent to the United Nations during the Cuban missile crisis to keep an eye on Ambassador Stevenson. Is there any truth to that?

PLIMPTON: I think that there were probably mixed motives there. What was involved was a protracted negotiation with ^{Vasily} ~~Alexander~~ N. Kuznetsov (Deputy Foreign Minister), whom the Russians sent over just to handle that one thing. He's the boy who's in Peking now, much the nicest Russian I've ever run into. He's quite a fellow. I think McCloy was sent by Kennedy partly because Stevenson was too damned busy trying to run the show, that is, the continuing U.N. General Assembly, to have time to negotiate with Kuznetsov, and partly because of some feeling that Adlai wasn't as tough as McCloy; I think it was a mixture of motives.

I remember this episode very well because I got the mumps just after the Russians agreed to take the missiles out and was out of commission for two or three weeks. When I came back McCloy and Kuznetsov (and also, to some extent, Adlai) had been arguing interminably about the agreement that was supposed to wrap up the solution to the crisis. You remember that U Thant's formula, which the Russians and we accepted, was that Russians would take the missiles out, and [Fidel] Castro would permit inspection by the U.N. to see they were all gone and that none would come back, and the U.S. would agree not to invade Cuba. Of course, Castro refused to permit any inspection.. So we said we don't have to agree to anything because Castro won't let anybody in. The Russians argued that we'd have to agree that we wouldn't invade just the same. Well, McCloy and Kuznetsov wrangled about this for the two weeks while I had the mumps. I got back and got into the act, and joined McCloy in the negotiations with Kuznetsov.

Negotiations with the Soviets are almost always alike. You sit down, and after a minimum of quasi-pleasantries they produce an interminable exposition of all the arguments ever made for their side--even if they've made them dozens of times before. In this case, we met at the Soviet Mission on East 67th Street between Park and Lexington, where they had bought a cooperative apartment house right opposite a fire station, a police station, and a Jewish synagogue. Incidentally, I had warned them that that was no place for their Mission to be, but they went right ahead and bought it and, as a result, certainly suffer from fire engines, police sirens and Jewish demonstrations. As a sovereign power immune from local law, they filled up the backyard with two large ugly receptions rooms in violation of New York building laws--I interceded for them with the New York City authorities, who appropriately winked.

We sat on the monstrously overstuffed Grand Rapids type couch and I began to speak, and Kuznetsov started out with almost an hour's recitation of why the U.S. had to sign an agreement that he would never invade Cuba. I had the feeling that there was a recording instrument in the sofa upholstery, and that Kuznetsov had to repeat what he had obviously said many times before so that the Kremlin boys would realize that he was doing his job fully.

McCloy simply grinned and said, "Mr. Minister, as you know, I have heard that line many times before--just consider that I have made the same reply that I have made many times before. Now let's get down to business."

By that time, it was clear we weren't ever going to agree, so we finally agreed to disagree and got up a little bit of a half-page communique that really said nothing much except that we hadn't agreed. That wasn't very hard to work out. McCloy went away somewhere, and I ended up by negotiating the final wording with Kuznetsov. We got along fine; he made a harmless suggestion to which I agreed, and that was it. He looked at me and said, "Mr. Plimpton, you remind me of the story of the Russian peasant who went to the fair. He was very hungry and he bought a big loaf of white bread. He ate that and still he was hungry. Then he bought a loaf of black bread and he ate that and still was hungry. Then he saw a little piece of chocolate cake and he bought it and ate that little piece of chocolate cake and then he wasn't hungry any more. And then he said, 'What a fool I was; I should have got that little piece of chocolate cake first.' You, Mr. Plimpton, you are that little piece of chocolate cake." Kuznetsov told the same story about me to Kennedy when the President came up here later. Kuznetsov was a very attractive fellow. McCloy and he and I all got along fine.

O'BRIEN: Well, in working relationships, you mentioned that Ambassador Stevenson would hand out certain tough tasks to you. Was there any kind of division of tasks, in a sense, in your working relationships with Ambassador Stevenson, in preference of issues?